



A Sojourn into the Afghani Customs and Beliefs through the Lens of Religiosity in Nadiya Hashimi's 'The Pearl That Broke its Shell'

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Abstract— Afghanistan, an Islamic country, has always been counted as the most barbaric abode for women. As per the news that has been taking round, the life of these women is filled with battles, restrictions and social discriminations. They are compelled to accept everything in the name of religion and are even denied from receiving the fundamental rights. The Afghan society is overpowered by men who call themselves religious and yet refuse to follow the guidelines mentioned in the holy text. Religion is a way of life which chalks down certain norms and demarcations for men as well as women, to abide by those, in order to have a tangle free peaceful society for every individual to thrive in. The holy Quran clearly mentions equality for women. The Lord says: ***“I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female - you are equal to one another.”*** ([Our'an, 3: 195](#)). The Government of the state has imposed certain laws which brutally restrict its women from enjoying certain liberties. Demolition of their fundamental rights has not only made them weak, marginalized and subjugated but also left them bereft of their basic right to live like a human being. Under decades of war, the Taliban regime has been yielding the most oppressive lives for Afghan women. The very common Purdah custom, escorting of men, forced polygamy and gender segregation has become the staunch and hardcore rules for these women. The present study brings to the fore the many times pictured tumultuous predicament of women in Afghan society and puts it to examine how despite the age old ragged customs and rigid norms that has wreaked havoc on their status; these iron willed women have put up a brave face to fight against the injustices and restrictions piled on them by the radicalized men and striven to rise out of the debris. Nadiya Hashimi's 'The Pearl That Broke Its Shell' not only defines a woman's place in the face of violence but also highlights the resolution of this subjugated sect to liberate them from the tightened fist.



Keywords— Restrictions, patriarchy, subjugation, hardcore rules, havoc, liberate, restrictions, radicalized, fist

'My fate was sealed in blood on the day of my birth.'-
([Hashimi, When the Moon is Low](#))

On the world map, Afghanistan is a landlocked country located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia ([wikipedia](#)). It is popularly referred to as the graveyard of empires as the land has not only been home to various staunch peoples, historically, but has also witnessed numerous bloody military campaigns. Afghanistan has

been dominated by extensive war fares since the late 1970's and the Islamic Fundamentalist Taliban has overpowered most of the nation since 1996. Ever since the takeover, the condition of the women has been really appalling and threatening. They have been entirely excluded from public office and judiciary, are compelled to a strict dress code and are not permitted to travel without a spouse or a family member. Consequently, they

have been fettered in their homes and are denied access to every basic need. In such a dire situation, health facility and education are beyond imagination. Here I would like to share my personal experience. Recently I happened to watch an OTT series *'The Freelancer'* which dealt with the life of women somewhat similar to the ones I had read in the novel. The rigidity of the social norms, the stringent rules for not just women but every individual filled my heart with a strange fright and hatred for those men who, in the name of religion, convert the precious lives created by God into hell. These people seem to be living like Zombies awaiting their doom. Who has given them the right to be so anarchaic? God cannot be so cruel and blood thirsty.

Nadia Hashimi is an Afghan-American writer who made her debut in the literary arena with the novel *'The Pearl That Broke its Shell'* in 2014. Her other works are *When the Moon is Low* (2015) and *A House without Windows* (2016). Through her writings, she conveys the culture of Afghan people, especially women, and their restrictions concerning gender discriminations. Her novels are actually recorded as a document of a rare combination of the cultural flavor and emotional relevance of the life lived by the females of Afghanistan. They implicate the authors' personal observation and the life that she herself noticed being its native. Hashimi has stated in an interview with [Kimmery Martin](#) that, *"The Afghan culture has always been part of my daily life. Being of Afghan descent has also kept me keenly interested in current events in the country and the evolving situation for women and girls"* ([Web](#)). The scary and threatening narrative *'The Pearl that Broke its Shell'* exhibits the desperation and fear of these thwarted women and the disconsolate yearnings to have their woes voiced in a bid to seek redemption and salvation from the gory life. It is a story of two women based in Afghanistan, living a decade apart from each other and yet linked by fortune. The novel's format entwines the protagonist's events happening in the present with that of her late grand aunt Shekiba's from the 1890s. It deals with the contemporary storyline of *'Bacha posh'* and the struggles associated with their masqueraded life. The novel deeply explores the dangers and anxieties of a woman in an extremely patriarchal society. It also depicts motherhood as the sole solace for the oppressed women of the traditional Afghan society. As the story unfolds; we find Rahima, Shekiba, and Raisa representing contrasting modes of womanhood. Female empowerment, with the passage of time, has consistently enhanced in certain countries whilst in Afghanistan, it seems, it has halted for these women.

Subordination is an act of placing someone at a lower position or rank and with this comes the feeling of

impotence or powerlessness, and when this word is specifically tagged with a woman; it leaps ahead in its basis meaning and pushes the whole community into an inferior position. Such a situation is conveniently possible in a male dominating society as it grants its men the authority of controlling women by exhibiting physical strength. *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* mentions many such instances where the women are forcibly side-lined and snubbed. Nadia, as an educated and sensitive person, has successfully pictured the helplessness and desperation of these caged women, who, if given voice, could have brought miraculous positive change in their lives. Balancing her rational mind with the irrational Hashimi says in an interview to [Martin](#):

"Afghan culture is rife with superstitious beliefs.....I know there's no science to it, but it's one of those well-it-doesn't-hurt practices. That's how I balance my medical training with these practices. I'm fine with any "rabbit's foot" that doesn't cause injury". The novel, based on extensive study, dwells on women's acquiescence rampantly prevalent in Afghanistan. Fearing the adverse situation she adds, *"When it comes to the women imprisoned in Afghanistan, truth is stranger than fiction"*.

The nation, which was once a peaceful and serene haven, has been plagued by conflict for more than four decades now. But the women of today's Afghanistan are in no mood to surrender to the atrocities and bullying in the name of Heavenly order as they have miraculously learnt to endure adversity and face an immeasurable challenge to shape their destinies and establish a place for them in the society to which they belong. *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* narrates a poignant tale of the lives of women who are scorned and ostracized in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan. It is an interesting and captivating story of two young women, Rahima and Shekiba, who are compelled to disguise themselves as males in order to conceal their identity and survive in an anti-feminist society. The author has woven the story in a manner that throughout the novel the reader experiences a pendulum shift of plot which coils the two women together to create an enchanting yet terrifying tale. It is a superbly written story, about women who live in a totalitarian culture, with an engrossing theme and realistically dynamic characters. Ultimately, it is a dingy den where survival demands patiently planned action and its execution with utmost caution, for any careless act might put them on the throngs of death. It is highly astounding how such an adverse situation propels the delicate appearing fragile women to transform into a perennial ticking, life threatening time bombs. According to Simon de Beauvoir, *'One is not born, but becomes a woman'* ([web](#)). Here 'woman' resonates

with the Indian Goddess Durga, who took to arms after incessant enormity. This statement reverberates loud flagging the stark question of women identity. In her argument, Simon asserts unequivocally that the identities of women are greatly influenced by the social and cultural cult.

The novel presents two common trends frequented in Afghanistan towards women oppression. One is the concern about her fate of being married off to a man that would certainly mistreat her, and the other is her family's rejection of her if she has a physical defect. The situation raises several questions and compels the readers to deeply ponder over their pathetic condition, not writ by God but by a handful of misogynist men, who articulate a situation according to their convenience. They, it seems, have definitely misinterpreted the Holy Text; otherwise they wouldn't have dared to consider ruthlessness as their birth right. A question that prominently arises here is that, this male dominance and women subjugation; is it restricted to the radicalized Islamic States only? Or in the entire world where ever men live, arbitrary towards women is evidently rampant? A pattern which has been consistently observed, since a decade or more, sums up that every society, no matter which country, has quite comfortably and shamelessly chosen to control its women and snub them. Their dominating persona and over shadowing aura, is hated by every anti-feminist. The statement, the Pearl that broke its Shell, appears synonymous to the plight of every strong willed woman who has hatched out of her shell and created a dent into the social fabric through her sturdy presence. It's an irony that every successful woman has a tale of exploitation to her credit; awarded by the authoritative men of the society she belongs to. The statement by Letty Cottin Pogrebin, **'When men are oppressed, it's a tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition'** ([web](#)) resounds loud and clear.

The novel *'The Pearl That Broke its Shell'* encapsulates the story of two Afghan women who grew up a century apart but the acerbity is that despite a cosmic space; nothing has changed for the two female protagonists; Shekiba and Rahima. One plot is set in the early 20th century, which tells the story of Shekiba, who becomes a pariah, an outcast, after suffering a disfiguring accident as a young girl. This justifies the condition that the girls are disowned by the family when bodily disfigured out of certain known fears. The second plot takes place in 2007 when the Taliban exerted enormous influence over the lives of women, though they were not in power. The two stories, despite the long hiatus, represent acute similarities pertaining to the stature of Afghan women. Shakiba is a contemporary girl in post-Taliban Afghanistan, who after being orphaned by the epidemic of Cholera, transmutes

herself into a boy, an appearance which was disapproved by her own people and the society, **'A girl by herself! What dishonor this could bring to their family'** ([Simran Bhatiya. P.3](#)). She struggled every inch for survival before finally being handed over to Azizullah, by her uncle, to pay for her debt. The sojourn of her life is tough; she toils as a servant until she is presented to the king Habibulah as a guard of the Harem where she becomes Shekib, a manly figure. Shekiba fits into the palace life, ignoring rude treatment from the women of the Harem. She proves herself useful and continues to live a slaved life until charged with treachery and inhumanly stoned to death.

Rahima, the novel's protagonist, is an Afghani girl from a small town situated some distance away from Kabul. Compared to her great-great grandmother Shekiba, her life is slightly improved by the meager education she could procure. As usual, her life too is marked by abuse and resilience. She is the daughter of the opium-addicted soldier Arif and his wife Raisa. Rahima grows up with her four sisters. She, being the middle one, is the boldest. Unfortunately, she and her sisters could not continue with their education further due to the rigid anti-feminist norms and poverty. Also it was a foolish belief of their father that the daughters would cause him shame if allowed to study further or roam about. Rahima's anguish doesn't end here, at the suggestion of her aunt, Khala Shaima, she is pushed into becoming a *Bacha posh*, a social role that allows her to act as a son for the family. She is known during this disguised period as "Rahim." *'Bacha Posh'*, in Afghanistan, is an ancient ritual, which encourages girls to be treated as boys before they marry their respective partners. This tradition also spares the family from facing the social stigma associated with not having any male child. In Asian countries there is community pressure for families to have a son to carry on the family legacy and to inherit the father's property. As usual; having daughters and not a single son is considered a curse, **'Why do we have a house full of girls, not one, not two, but five of them'** ([Simran Bhatiya. P.2](#)). Consequently, in the absence of a son, the Afghan families generally dress one of their daughters as a male to manage outdoor errands and also with a belief that having a *Bacha posh* will make it more likely for the mother to give birth to a son in a subsequent pregnancy, a superstition that has provided sustenance to the tradition.

Rahima's story appears an extension of Shekiba's fate. Despite the wide rift, the conditions towards women seem to remain unaltered. She, like many other Afghan girls, is unfortunately born to carry the tradition of *'Bacha posh'*. Her desires are ignored; in fact nobody bothers to question her about her feelings and dreams. Her mother decides to

disguise her as a boy so that she is permitted to work, play, and attend school outside the family complex. Her true identity is concealed behind her boyish clothing in a desperate bid to shield her from the gory eyes of the males towards a budding female. She transforms into Rahim in order to shield her from the caressing eyes of the men around her. Disguised as Rahim, she was able to study further and master to write and read and learn computer as well. Rahima comfortably enjoys being Rahim till she is thirteen but her honey moon ends soon. As soon as she hits the stage of puberty; she is reverted to her original self and sold out as an artifact to Abdul Khaliq at the cost of a bride's price. Soon after Rahima's life takes drastic twist and misfortune befalls on her. She is forced into polygamy, where she becomes the fourth wife of the warlord. The journey of Rahima, from being a *Bacha posh* to the fourth wife of an aged man, is thoroughly enigmatic. In the new abode she is entitled as a maid who is put to all the household chores. Her condition seems deplorable and pathetic, similar to falling from a height into a ditch: ***'Poor girl. She ran out from under a leaking roof and sat in the rain'*** ([The Pearl that Broke its Shell](#)).

Rahima tries to adopt all the problems and workloads given to her by her new family. Here she finds a friend in Jameela, the second wife of Abdul Khaliq, who becomes her ally. Rahima soon gives birth to a baby boy who she affectionately names Jahangir. ***'When things are rough, people look for an escape. A way out. Sometimes it's hard to find the right way'*** ([The Pearl That Broke its Shell](#)). Rahima desperately seeks to escape from the hardships that she faces. Since the people in the family are rough in their nature, she aspires to quit. She is there only for her son Jahangir. It is rightly said that with motherhood comes a deep sense of responsibility and ownership. At this juncture, in Rahima, we trace a mature woman who has the strength to fight for her child and combat any atrocity that comes her way. Rahima's struggle to a free and liberated life is exemplary and a torch bearer for many a shackled women.

Apart from the two leading characters the novel carries, in its fold, a few minor characters too, who struggle hard to make their lives meaningful. If Rahima is iron willed, her mother Raisa is presented as a weak woman who, unable to take stand for herself, resorts to opium and sheepishly puts the blame on destiny. ***'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'*** ([The Pearl.....P.139](#)). The quote depicts her desperation towards her three daughters who are married away. She disposes her worries to Allah and prays and hopes for their well-being. Another character is Khala Shaima who is the

only obvious and distinct female in the novel who believes in Karma rather than Destiny. She is a dauntless woman who stands against misconduct and expresses her resistance against societal codes which impair women. She embodies a distinctive and unique perspective of life as she is fed up with the spineless patriarchal society. She is knowledgeable and intelligent and has full command and confidence on her learning and memorization of the Holy Quran. She is so fearless and bold that she checks the Priest several times in a room packed with men when he was reciting incorrect verses of the Holy text. In the novel, she is the sole propulsion behind Rahima's emancipation. Rahima has mentioned that it is Khala Shaima who remodeled her by narrating Bibi Shekiba's story. It is Khala Shaima whom we see supporting and emphasizing girls' education throughout the novel. She is the beacon of hope of a new Afghan surging towards liberation. She was the one who had raised her voice when Rahima and her sisters were being withdrawn from school. She is different and unique from the general sect of women as she refuses to surrender and forgo. She prefers challenging and confronting instead of giving up hopelessly. She doesn't blame destiny for each and every hardship she encounters. She is strong; she is defiant, she is different and yet; she is an Afghan woman!! Rahima's younger sister Parwin proves a weak character. She is born with a deformed body and unable to endure the tortures rained on her she seeks escape from domestic violence by setting herself ablaze. Zamarud, tries to stand boldly against the corruption in parliament but ultimately becomes the prey of social rage and succumbs.

Our destiny is not written for us but by us. It's a powerful tool of the orphaned and the abandoned. Rahima, in the novel, represents the narrative of thousands of repressed female voices who have been afflicted and adopted by 'naseeb' or destiny and have been forced to bury their hopes and aspirations under the ashes of shattered dreams. *'The Pearl That Broke Its Shell'* is the novel that boldly highlights the concerns about a woman's fate of being deliberately married off to a guy who would ill-treat her and convert her life into a virtual hell. It also puts forth stark probing questions regarding women's concern that need immediate registering. What could possibly be the actual reason behind the prevailing distorted condition of Afghan women wherein they find themselves swept with the torrent, into a ditch? Who, in fact, is the super dominant power that has got the authority to wreck havoc on their lives??? Shall we blame the destiny or the unruly uncanny men who consider themselves their guardian? Hashimi writes: ***'Life has typhoons. They come and turn everything upside down. But you still have to standup because the next storm may***

be around the corner' ([The Pearl that Broke its Shell](#)). As the show goes on and nothing stops, Rahima tries valiantly to break free from the suffocating shell and emerges as a pearl from its confines. This gesture of hers reminds me of a few revolutionary lines written by a famous Hindi poet Shivmangal 'Suman' in his poem 'Birds of the unfastened Skies' (translated version). He writes:

*'Pay no heed to the tree bough
Destroy and wreck my shelter
But if these wings I am to have,
Do not distress these frantic flights'*
([Web](#))

By narrating the story of these Afghan women the novelist has conveyed a timeless message that hasn't changed for centuries. The title of the novel seems to be apt for the protagonist, who is struggling to overcome the challenges of everyday life. After cursing herself for being a girl on countless occasions, she confides in her Khala's and Mother's encouraging words and this helps her to come to terms with the fact that she is important and invaluable, like a pearl. She has a strong attitude and spirit that helps her discover her innate strength while on the verge of collapsing under the weight of the battle between the Taliban and Western powers. Rahima is able to sustain and carry the trauma in her stride. In an interview dated 29th July, 2014, Hashimi asserts: *'I see Rahima and Shekiba as every woman. When I read Rumi's lines, the sea is Rahima's inner voice, expansive and powerful, beckoning her to break free and realize her potential. We all need to mind that voice that lives within, that tells us to want better for ourselves, to not throw up our hands in defeat'* ([Interview](#)).

Nadia Hashimi's novel illuminates the plight of marginalized women in Afghan, who are mere puppets of the male-oriented society. This novel is not simply a comprehensive study of the victimization of Afghan women, but also an intimate cross-check of cultures and a document on how a society treats a woman and how religion is being misused for personal advantages. It is a story that transports its readers to a state of unease, where the dejected souls of Afghan women perpetually strive for self-identity and self-consciousness. The Prophet proclaimed, *'And I advise you to take care of the women, for they are created from a rib.....; If you try to straighten it, it will break, and if you leave it, it will remain crooked.....'* ([Hadith 5185; Sahih Al Bukhari](#)). The quote clearly instructs men to be humane towards females. But disobeying rule and breaking laws, it seems, is his nature which he can't alter.

Hashimi's novel is a suffocating journey indeed but a sigh of relief is that it creates an optimistic aura towards the end. The two women Rahima and Shekiba become the epitome of bravery for other women residing in Afghanistan against the cruel demon of patriarchy. Through this novel, Hashimi has successfully tried to focus on the terribly major issues engraved in the culture of Afghanistan firmly believing that sooner or later it will bring a revolutionary change in the attitude of its people, the men. The contemporary world of Afghanistan, under Taliban regime, is busy weaving abject environs for their women. On one hand where European countries are giving full-fledged freedom and equality to their women, survival for Afghan women has become extremely tough due to unethical conditions. Today the world is more prone towards the resurrection and reformation of women. Several organizations are working to improve the women's status quo. Education has always proved a benchmark in raising their stature. Creative skills and their active participation in almost every top notch field are the only medium through which women can show that they are not mere puppets or mouthpieces of men. If given an opportunity, they can speak and stand for their collective empowerment. To conclude, *'But times change. Everything changes. Birds fly away, one by one'* ([The Pearl that Broke its Shell](#)).

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