

AFGHAN NARRATIVES PORTRAYING THE IDENTITY CRISES:  
INTERPRETING THE PATTERN OF "BACHA-POSH" IN A PEARL  
THAT BROKE ITS SHELL

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**Abstract:**

Afghanistan is a wounded country that conceals heart-wrenching narratives of unforgiving times. It has had a history of epidemic violence and the harrowing tales supplement the political, economic, psychological, and social milieu that has enveloped the country through the centuries. The political turmoil in the country has had a direct as well as indirect bearing on its women folk. The narratives surfacing speak of powerlessness, fate, and freedom combining the cultural flavour. My paper explores the identity crisis where the females are constantly seeking freedom from hierarchical and patriarchal domination. They are in constant conflict to re-establish their identity free from male, ethnic, religious, and imperial domination. As Simon de Beauvoir remarks rightly, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Women in Afghanistan have been experiencing tribulations and traversing the uphill road to shape their destinies and carve a niche for them. My paper focuses on the novel written by writer of Afghan descent but living elsewhere; "The Shell that Broke its Shell" by Nadia Hashimi. The novel depicts a portrait of Afghanistan in all of its confusing, enigmatic glory, and echo the ongoing struggles of Afghan women, "The Pearl that Broke its Shell" resonances the patriarchal setup in Afghanistan that suppresses a woman, defining her role amidst the violence both inside and outside the home. The title itself has been taken from the Rumi poem. Thus this novel mirrors the journey where the characters break free and employ "cross-dressing" to evolve a new identity within a larger social dimension.

**Key Words:** Afghanistan, Destruction, Existence, Identity, Marriage, Resistance & War

**Introduction:**

Every woman has a story to write and every story contains her heart's truth, dreams, dilemmas, and reality. Columbia Forum Hardwick candidly examines her own feelings towards women writers: "The proper study of mankind may be man, but the subject for women is other women... it is a subject upon which one can speak with something like authority. I am, say to myself, a woman after all." Writing, therefore, has become a powerful tool for women in their conquest to re-establish their distinctive self that has been a victim of patriarchy through the centuries. Women; imprisoned or silenced, veiled or unveiled, at home or in exile, in East or in West or in any other corner of the world, can change the course of history through their narratives. They need to give voice to the isolation, vulnerability, and suffocation they feel as a woman; prisoners of society, cultures, religion and patriarchy. Henrik Ibsen rightly commented, "A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view."

We have seen the rise of male writers who are writing for and about women, who speak for the false notions of patriarchy as powerful but ultimately reveal the identity crises that a woman suffers. It can be tricky for a male author to write from the perspective of a character of the other gender. How do you get inside the head of your opposite? But certain male writers write in a patriarchal voice, the tales displaying the prejudices that manifest themselves upon women's bodies, for the woman's body, "is for us to mark our territory/and to conduct our wars."

Nadia Hashimi, an Afghan- American makes her debut as a writer by her well- achieved novel, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. The title itself has been taken from Rumi, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Mystic poet's poem "There is Some Kiss We Want." The lines of the poem have been used in the novel at the time of one of the concubine named Benafsha's execution. Benafsha from another story of Shekiba, is one of the concubine of king where Shekiba is the king's 'harem's' guard and through this character Nadia Hashimi highlights the hypocrisy of the patriarchal structure where the king, being a male can legally have a mistress whereas the concubine cannot have a lover and if she does, she is stoned to death for the crime of adultery; where the adulteress has not been formally wedded as the religion and culture demands. Benafsha is stoned to death, for the crime of love, that she has for a man who is the product of patriarchy and cannot take a stand for her and the consequence is that a woman is executed, without disclosing name of the man who has led her to the unnatural death.

*"There is some kiss we want,  
With our whole live,  
The touch spirit on the body.  
Seawater begs the pearl  
To break its shell.  
And lily, how passionately  
It needs some wild darling!  
At night, I open the window  
And press its face into mine.  
Breathe into me  
Close the language- door  
Open the love- window  
The moon won't use the door  
Only the window."*

Just as Rumi infuses mysticism into the nature of human longings and spirit- each torment, each delight- Nadia Hashimi talks about esoteric resilience of human spirit and she juxtaposes the image as "harder than a rock and more delicate than a flower

petal.” *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* is an intense tale of destiny, ‘naseeb’ as it is called, powerlessness, and the freedom to control one’s own fate resonating the likes of Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Lisa See. Criss-crossing in time, it interweaves the narratives of two women, separated by two generations who share a same thread of ‘naseeb.’

#### **Narratives of Aghan Women:**

This is a narrative of Rahima and Sheikba, who across the times share a thread of fate that divulges the ongoing struggles that women in general and Afghan women in particular try to overcome. Afghanistan has an ongoing epidemic of violence, and the violence has perpetuated the trauma for which the victims have largely been women. The cultural and the social violence has placed the status of women as subordinate which is a product of social norms, values and practices which restricts their capacity to exercise choice in their lives and relationships. This has in turn affected the women’s sense of identity and self-worth; their willingness to question their subordinate status, their ability to formulate strategic life choices and their competence to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the society in which they live. Patriarchy in Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in establishing a woman’s identity in accordance with the social and cultural setting. In the context of weak law and order, the strict tribal norms, gendered values and religious extremism, which are embedded in the history of Afghanistan, associated with gross violations of the rights of women. Patriarchy is a disease that runs in our culture and irony is that men are not even aware of it, the reason being that it is so seeped into our psychic. Patriarchy is a political-social system, which maintains that males are innately “dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.” And this right to dominate through psychological terrorism and violence has been a natural part of Afghan narratives where a voice resonates from the subaltern echoing the need to ascertain their identity.

#### **Analysing Cross-Dressing as Patriarchal Construct:**

Rahima is our main storyteller. She echoes the tale of thousands of suppressed voices whom being females, are struck by “naseeb,” to bury their dreams and hopes. This is a tale of two women in two very different Afghanistans: one on the threshold of modernization, and the other on the verge of collapse under the pressure of the war between the Taliban and the Western forces. These two women, Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba face similar problems being women in a patriarchal society that does not have any role for women besides bearing sons and doing housework. The two stories have been fused together with present merging with the past. Rahima has the grave misfortune to be another daughter born into her family. In Afghanistan, the lack of sons is a social and economic disaster. She cannot go to school; she cannot move out of her house without a male accomplice (also called as Mahram) and thus has to be shackled, within the confines of her home. She is one of the five sisters who have the courage to question her identity and challenge the patriarchal code along with the backing of her Aunt Shaima. Rahima is vocal, where the other sisters are silent, but each one wants to escape the incessant hegemonic order. Her father is addicted to opium and does little or no work. He still believes in the disillusioned wars he has been fighting with the local tribal warlord, Abdul Khaliq. Without a son to go out in the world and shop and work for the family their situation is desperate. It is Rahima’s beloved aunt Shaima who reminds her mother of an ancient custom: “bacha posh”—treating a young girl as a boy in families where there are no male children. Her hair is cut short, she wears boys’ clothes and is allowed to work, play, and go to school outside the family compound. It is a period of the greatest joy in her life. She thus, conceals her identity under the garb of boy’s clothing. From Rahima, she becomes Rahim, a boy “who can run to the store without worrying about the boys bothering, and could play games.” From the time she is nine until she is thirteen, Rahima is Rahim to everyone, even within her home. Through Rahima, *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* deals with questions that most of the Afghan women have been battling; the right to education for girls, the freedom for girls to exist without being seen as indecent, women’s biggest achievement being more than the birth of sons, etc. The irony being that the same questions have been echoed in Shekiba’s times, generations ago. The society and the mindset it has created in Afghanistan have not had a very large change; the child-brides like Rahima still exist and the women’s role confined to wifehood and motherhood in spite of everything predominates. It is because of the atypical act where Rahim has to behave like a boy against the physicality of being a female and it is not until she unwittingly causes a fight between her parents and her drug addict father decides to marry off his three oldest daughters, including Rahima. Her father is an irresponsible man, who cannot give up his authority and though the beatings, breakings, and shouting he exercises his dominance and power.

Aunt Shaima is the girls’ strongest ally and before they were sold off in marriage; the concept of bride price in this culture is introduced. The daughters are given in marriage to Abdul Khaliq and his cousins only after they are able to pay one million afghanis. The daughters are married without any consideration for the age of the grooms, “the birds fly away, one by one.” Rahima’s identity, even though after employing the “bacha-posh” remains the same, a woman whose character is determined and influenced by the patriarchal order where she is supposed to do her father’s bidding first and her husband’s later. “You are Rahima. You are a girl and you need to remember to carry yourself like one. Watch how you walk and how you sit. Don’t look people, men, in the eye and keep your voice low.” This is what her mother gives in legacy to her daughter; to suppress her individuality and act like a slave.

It is aunt Shaima who narrates the tale of their great-great-grandmother, Shekiba, who lived in the early 1900s. She visits Rahima after her marriage and instills a hope for better, independent future. She recounts the story of Shekiba and from her tries to draw moral where Shekiba “somehow found an escape from a much worse “naseeb.” Shekiba in her childhood is spilt with hot oil on half her face and with no medical care, she is disfigured for life. The disfigurement is another point where she is not accepted in the social order- a woman with disfigurement! She lives as a half-boy, half-girl after her family dissociates with the reality and wither away because of the epidemic cholera that took away the lives of her siblings. She survives but it is a disadvantage to her since the ‘daughter with a burned scar’ stays alive. It is after her father’s death that she is taken by her father’s mother to live in their compound and work as a slave. She is called as “Shekiba-e-shola.” She is disregarded by everyone in her father’s family. Later, she is used to pay off a debt to a family where her identity is again shredded away within the household slavish chores she is supposed to do. It is there that a seed to regain her identity begins to grow; she wants to inherit her father’s land legally through

the deed that has been hidden by her father in their house. She somehow gets the deed from her house and is able to take it to the Hakeem that can legalize the procedure but the claim to her right is torn to pieces and she is beaten to death. She cannot inherit her father's land because her identity is a female and traditions do not allow the stupidity of a daughter to become heir to her father's property. "Girl, you know nothing of tradition," he said, and tore the deed into pieces." Shekiba, as her name meant, "the gift" is always given away, but not to be cherished but abused and exploited. Ultimately, she is given to the king's household to help guard his harem. "Shekiba, the half-face. The girl- boy who walks like a man. Shekiba was not anything whole, she realized." She works and lives as a man but is still filled with the insecurity of being a woman as she can be bartered away at any time. In *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*, women have no value beyond their ability to bear sons. They are chattel with no rights, even in 2007. There is no point in even dreaming of a better life because if husbands or male family members aren't abusing you there is equally harsh treatment to be expected from mothers-in-law who are vicious and cruel or older wives whose envy and fear of being displaced makes them bitter. The mothers in laws symbolize the power that patriarchy represents. Both Rahima and Shekiba are strong, bright women who are beaten with impunity and denied what we consider to be the most basic rights of humans.

#### **Conclusion:**

The novel identifies patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppressed status that allows men to move freely, create laws and norms, write history, interpret religion, alienate women within the household chores stressing the need to subvert the patriarchal set up of the society which allows only men to move freely, make rules and laws, write history, interpret religion. Both the novels are preoccupied with the theme of women identity and experiences. Hashimi gives voice to the female version of the story, a version that according to her was mostly subdued and sidelined in her nation. The female characters in these novels struggle against different forms of oppression and valiantly expose its various manifestations. These women are involved in a search for an individual voice, an independent space, and self. They defy conventionality; transgress the socially accepted definition of womanhood and the boundaries in their search for individual identity. Both wifehood and motherhood are glorified in the patriarchal system. These roles are granted social sanctions and at the same time are eulogized in local folk lore, in literature, and religion so that women do actively engage themselves in playing their social roles and thus themselves contribute and perpetuate the patriarchal social order. The woman has been considered as low, someone who is incapable of taking decisions independently and this is rightly described by Kate Millet who associates the story of the Fall as "the central myth of the Judeo-Christian imagination and therefore of our immediate cultural heritage", and continues: "This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes" (Millet, 1969: Ch. 2). Through her weakness, woman is believed to have brought about the fall of humanity, represented by Adam. Woman is, therefore, both vulnerable to temptation and a temptress herself, a threat to the moral welfare of mankind. Through her desire to taste of the forbidden, woman caused innocence to be forfeited. Woman is thereby seen to disregard authority, to be capable of seeking to usurp divine (male) power, and to be carnal in her nature. In consequence, woman, her sexuality, and her reproductive function must be controlled by man. This is to be achieved through the institution of marriage and through the cult of motherhood, which confines woman to the home, under the authority and protection of her husband, the male, defined by God as the worker and the breadwinner. Thus, the Biblical story of the Creation and the Fall becomes the basis of patriarchy, defined by Rich as a "familial-social, ideological, political system ... in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (cited in Eisenstein, 1983: 5).

Rahima, the narrator of *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell* is made to stand up against tradition by employing "bacha-posh" where the gender injustice is made to come to forefront and it subverts the patriarchal strictures by defying the traditional social codes of womanhood. She ventures outside, unveiled and alone and presents herself to the world like the "fortunate males." Her decision to leave her husband and start a new life is her first step toward self-determination and freedom. All these women, in one way or the other, protest against the roles traditionally assigned to them and fight for voices in a repressive patriarchal world.

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